

LIFE FROM THE DEAD.

A Sermon preached in the First Church, Boston, on the day following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States.

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LUKE xxiv. 5, 6: "And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen."

THE voices still sound for the ear of faith; and he who hath that ear, let him hear what the spirit saith unto the churches to-day. It is our resurrection-morning, a time consecrated to gladness; and yet it finds a nation in tears. Our tower of strength is fallen. Bloody violence has invaded the high places of the land; and he who was in deed as well as in name the head of the people, more and more trusted, more and more loved, as he was better and better known, lies dead,—our country's martyr. Only on the last Thursday, I tried to acknowledge, in a few earnest words, the eminent worth and high services of our noble President, and now he is no more with us on earth; and, saddest thought of all, the wrath of man hath wrought for us this woe. Let every believing soul exercise a high and serene and Christian trust, according to the great necessities of an hour which hath no precedent in our history, and be wise and calm and faithful in the persuasion, that, in the providence of God, the wrath of man shall accomplish all the more completely that divine purpose which nothing can defeat or so much as delay. Our Easter* flowers shall remain in the house of prayer, not because we are glad,—we cannot be glad to-day,—but because we are full of the great hope which is the Christian's anchor, and which holds in the stormiest sea. They are providentially here to grace the burial of our Chief Magistrate, honored and well-beloved, the best defence of the nation, under God, only yesterday: they shall be eloquent

* Easter Sunday, April 16.

symbols of immortality, shining witnesses of the light that burns behind the darkest clouds, and of the love which is unchanging ; of the earth, earthy, and yet fragrant as with the airs of heaven, and telling us of things heavenly, that —

“ Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood
Stand dressed in living green.”

I am not sorry that it is Easter-morning ; that the sad message has found us at the open tomb of Jesus, thankful, with a Christian thankfulness, that death is for ever abolished, and taught, by that look of triumph in the eyes of our risen Lord, how surely and how swiftly sometimes God brings the best things out of the worst, and clothes the heaviest spirits in the most radiant garments of praise. Let us confess his hand ; and that known unto him are all the works of man from the foundation of the world ; and that this blow also was needed, else it had not been given in the providence of One who never willingly afflicts.

“ Why seek ye the living among the dead ? He is not here, but is risen.” It is a pious, faithful, and most tender office to go to the graves of our loved ones ; and not to weep there were to be less than human. Know ye not, said the apostle, that ye are the temples of God ; and that your very bodies are consecrated, fashioned into majesty and beauty by the life within ? And we have all seen how the departing spirit sets upon the lifeless form its own lovely image ; and, in proportion as we honor the soul, we deal very tenderly with the soul’s wonderful tabernacle. Nevertheless, there is need of the question, “ Why seek ye the living among the dead ? ” — need that, even here in Christendom, we should again and again be told, “ He is not here, but is risen.” They are not the words which man’s wisdom teacheth. Science does not announce them amongst her discoveries, old or new. The heart of nature hath no such burden as that to roll forth from its burning core, persistent as is its hope, deep as is its desire of immortality. The voices are the voices of angels : they come to us from that tomb in which Christ and his gospel seemed to be for ever buried ; they are the echoes

of those early testimonies which declared to all the world, beginning at Jerusalem, that he who “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried,” rose from the dead on the third day, to be called, ever after, the Lord’s Day, to be the Easter of each week,—

“Till week-days, following in their train,
The fulness of the blessing gain;
Till all, both resting and employ,
Be one Lord’s Day of holy joy.”

It is an unspeakable privilege to live in days when the angelic voices are to be heard; and we never hear them more distinctly, and are never more sure that they are from heaven, than when, in our human weakness, we are afraid, and our faces are bowed down to the earth. It would be agony sometimes to look upon the poor stricken body, over which the change may have passed almost in the twinkling of an eye, if the spirit which leads us into all blessed and consoling truths were not waiting for the opportunity to say, “He is not here, but is risen;” for that is what the spirit whispers in the heart of every true believer since the Lord abolished death. The bridegroom has been taken from them, and the children of the bride-chamber may well mourn; but it is a holy and hopeful sorrow which moves their hearts, and they are lifted at once into heavenly places with the departed, and he is transfigured before them; and the eyes which were holden before that they could not see are anointed; and, because he lives, we live. Listen now, as you never yet have listened, for the angelic voices. It is a nation’s opportunity to grow into a deeper faith in the everlasting life,—a faith that death only sets free, and reveals the bound and hidden soul. It is a faith which we owe to Christ. He changed the philosopher’s opinion and the people’s hope into a practical and abiding persuasion. The angels did not light up the tomb with their glowing faces and shining garments until he was laid in it. Then words of good cheer were heard, which were not passed by as the idle tales of the superstitious, but were taken up as most authentic

Gospels, and proclaimed wherever men, from fear of death, were subject to bondage. It is our blessed heritage from those who were glad because they had seen the Lord. It is a faith which we can have in its power and fulness only so far as we are thoroughly Christian, not merely in the reception of the outward facts, but in a conformity to the very heart and mind of Christianity. It is a faith which must be proportioned to our other faiths, and chiefly to our confidence in truth and goodness and immortal love. Not to all the people is Christ revealed, but to witnesses chosen before of God, who, though like Thomas they might hesitate for a moment, could not scoff like the Athenians when Jesus and the resurrection were named together, since nothing could be more credible than the rising of such a Lord.

Not of us is it to believe ; and yet God's gift is also our act, and we must exercise ourselves in this grace; and a public grief so heavy and so unlooked for, and so suggestive of anxious questionings as this which presses upon all hearts to-day, may challenge and exalt our faith in things unseen, and help us to taste the powers of the world to come even more than a private sorrow. Let this be the measure of our Christianity. By this let us know whether we have been the companions and friends of Jesus, whether we look at the things which are seen, or at the things which are not seen, according as we shall be able to look up from the grave, and to seek for the living in their appointed and exalted places. God is not the God of the dead. Truly to confess him is to confess the life everlasting. No hand of violence can rob you of aught living, or consign you to hopeless sorrowing for the dead, if you yourself are truly alive. Find the soul in the body whilst the body lives, and you cannot be persuaded, — no, not though an angel from heaven should say it, — that, when the body dies, the soul too goes down with the dust into the grave. “Neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.” Oh for that strong and ardent faith, which, in losing a visible person, gains an invisible life ! — a life which is ours no more by virtue of corporal contact or contiguity, but flows in upon us through channels hidden and

divine. It is a blessed faith which enables us, when the man is gone, to rejoice as we never rejoiced before in his high and gracious manhood; and, when the countenance is changed, to walk more gladly and steadfastly than ever before in the pure light which illumined it, and made the hard lines of a plain and often sad face soft and flowing and almost comely. It is a blessed faith which so joins us to the wisdom and goodness, to the honor and gentleness, and all the fair and sweet humanities of our friend, that, when he is taken from us in a moment, we find that what made him justly dear is more ours than ever; not to be groped for amongst the dead, but already abroad in this world of the living; accomplishing still the will of God on earth, and amongst the children of men. It is a blessed faith which suffers us not to linger over our dead beyond the just time of a natural and healthy sorrow, but commits and commends us, as soon as may be, to the paths of our daily life in which he walked, to the works which he was not permitted to do, and to the greater works which he promised, which makes him more to us in the way of inspiration and guidance than he could have been whilst he was in the body. In mourning for the tabernacle which a mad and wicked hand hath invaded, do not forget to seize and appropriate the great life which hath been not so much unclothed as clothed upon. Disappoint any who may have secretly desired or planned this great crime, by showing forth, with the enthusiasm of a new discipleship, the very being, the very persistent purpose, which they would have put out of the world had it been possible. And what vengeance is to be compared with that divine vengeance which multiplies a thousand-fold the one voice that a cruel death has silenced, and makes of the truth which was buried in the ground a word of strength and joy for the whole world?

There is a crime unto death. It ought not to be lightly dealt with. Let no man ask that it may be forgiven; but, when the ministers of God who bear not the sword in vain have fulfilled their office, and the criminal has received the stern sentence, let us remember, were it only for the honor

and the love which we bear to our dead, the generous and humane spirit that was so large a part of his noble manhood. I confess that I have not thought that they mourn for him wisely, who, renouncing his spirit before his poor outraged clay was cold, propose to be bitter and revengeful in fact, though not of course in name, as he was not. Friends,—*Christian* friends,—followers of him whose first disciples were as loving as they were just, let us not forget the many sad warnings of man's history, the cheats which his deceitful heart has put upon him; let us not forget that what is begun in righteousness and love is often ended, and not well, in unrighteousness and wrath. We shall have lost our noble leader indeed, if we lose his spirit, the wise and considerate mind, the excellent judgment, the tender, humane heart, that were in him; if, with all the wrongs, cruel wrongs, foul wrongs, that we have suffered as a nation, we forget that we are a *Christian* nation, and proceed to demand, and that too in the name of our gentle sufferer, measures of severity which he would never have sanctioned; so taking advantage of his dying, to thwart one of the high aims of his living. You know that I have spoken in but one voice from the beginning of this war, pleading for its rightfulness in the sight of the highest *Christianity*; and so you will not misunderstand my warning, lest, misled by passion, and not following, as we suppose, our man of peace, we inaugurate a reign of terror and blood. God grant that our martyr may be our deliverer; that he who was raised up in the most manifest providence of the Lord to be our counsellor and guide in our years of sore trial may still rule and bless the people from the hiding-place of spiritual power; and, if we have had occasion to distrust him who is now called to the highest seat, may our fears be changed into hopes, and the desire of the nation be accomplished!*

* The preacher desires that the paragraphs above may not be interpreted as recommending lenity to the authors of privy conspiracy and rebellion, and he is glad to add that the circumstances, well known to the country, which led so many to distrust our present national Chief Magistrate, have been explained by those who speak with authority to his entire satisfaction.

